

**Growing Enrollment: Understanding Faculty Contributions to Undergraduate
Recruitment in Agricultural Programs**

Maeley Herring
2500 Broadway
Lubbock, Texas 79409
Maeley.herring@ttu.edu

Introduction

College recruitment has served as a key component of strategic initiatives in higher education, aiming to expand enrollment, attract high-achieving students, and sustain financial stability (Adams-Johnson et al., 2018). Colleges of agriculture are under increasing pressure to develop robust recruitment programs (Solomonson et al., 2023). With the growing need for graduates across a range of agricultural disciplines (Rayfield, 2013), it is essential for institutions to dedicate time and resources to recruitment and craft strategies that more effectively attract students through faculty engagement with prospective students. Faculty engagement can be interaction with prospective students through conversations about their interest in their respective department. Additionally, the importance of strong faculty-student relationships has grown significantly over the years (Snijders et al., 2020). Strong relationships with faculty are vital in student engagement, academic success, retention, and overall performance (O’Keeffe, 2013; see also Klem & Connell, 2004; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Research indicates that interactions with faculty during the recruitment process are valuable sources of information for students considering a college of agriculture (Rocca & Washburn, 2005), and faculty interaction is a valuable component of students’ college choice (Solomonson et al., 2023). Research is limited regarding student-faculty interaction during their recruitment experience, including what students seek from faculty. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature to examine the recruitment experiences of prospective undergraduate students in higher education and the role faculty engagement plays in influencing their decision to attend Texas Tech. This study is guided by the research question: “Are faculty members relevant in the recruitment experience of higher education undergraduate students within colleges of agriculture?”

Conceptual Framework

Students’ college choice has been a topic of numerous research efforts aiding in understanding what factors drive students’ decisions to attend a specific institution. Chapman (1981) examines the relationships between student characteristics and external characteristics in his Influences of Student College Choice Model, providing a foundation for recruiters and educators within higher education concerning what factors influence student decisions to attend a specific institution or college. The external influences listed are significant persons, fixed college characteristics, and college efforts to communicate with students. However, faculty interaction with students is not an element within this framework (Chapman, 1981). This framework has been used to understand the role of social media engagement in college recruitment (Martin, 2015), parental income and college choice (Delaney, 1997), and job choice and recruitment (Darnold & Rynes, 2013). The focus of this study was on college recruitment efforts by learning more about the phenomenon of students’ recruitment experiences during their campus visit and how faculty may have influenced their experience and college choice.

Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenological approach, which allowed for the exploration of the common meaning for a group of individuals with the same lived experience or phenomenon-potential undergraduate students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The population was First Time in College (FTIC) students, including freshmen and transfer students, in their first semester at TTU. Questions focused on *what* students experienced during their campus visits and *how* they experienced faculty involvement and reported impacts on their perspectives, retention, and college choice. An open-ended Qualtrics survey was administered via email using a convenience

sampling method. Sixty-four students participated in the study, fifteen of whom had attended an official campus visit and met with a faculty member. Then, the data was analyzed using phenomenological analysis and representation (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Results and Findings

Students shared positive feedback from their interactions with faculty on their college visit, with two key themes emerging: *Connection as influence* and *Support for empowerment*. Under the *Connection as an influence* theme, students expressed how important relationships with faculty were in their college decisions. Students initially felt intimidated by faculty members (based on preconceived ideas) but noted how personable and approachable faculty members were after their interactions. Students reported they recognized the significance of personally knowing faculty members and admired faculty who expressed interest in their enrollment at the institution. Participants appreciated cultivating professional relationships with their future faculty members. Under the *Support to empowerment* theme, students reported the positive impact of faculty conversations about resources related to long-term success. Students valued faculty members providing proactive support and information on degree plans, campus resources, scholarships, and professional opportunities. Students who did not meet with faculty during their visit expressed interest in meeting with a faculty member to develop relationships and gain program knowledge. According to respondents, knowledge of campus involvement, campus diversity, financial aid concerns, and discipline expertise is an expectation for visits with faculty.

Conclusions

The results reinforced faculty members' large impact on undergraduate students' college choice during their recruitment experiences, especially through intentional connections, empowering students through support, and being genuinely caring and interested. This study challenges Chapman's Model of Student Choice by including faculty as an influential piece to external influences in students' college choice, with the data showing faculty members served as significant people of influence and an important aspect of students' campus visit experience, often positively impacting their college choice. Students reported connections with faculty members diminished fears and encouraged them academically and personally regarding college. Overall, establishing an authentic connection creates a sense of loyalty to the institution and cultivates positive expectations during the college search process. Prospective and enrolled students are more likely to succeed when they feel valued by faculty (Law et al., 2020).

Implications and Recommendations

With enrollment numbers declining across U.S. institutions, colleges of agriculture are seeking effective strategies to sustain and grow their student population (Solomonson, 2023). Identifying meaningful ways to engage prospective students during the recruitment process is essential to influence their decision to enroll, including implementing faculty involvement in undergraduate student recruitment during campus visits. Based on findings, it is encouraged that colleges of agriculture include faculty members in building intentional and genuine connections with students and families. Overall, faculty impact students' college decisions by providing valuable perspectives and should be trained to assist in the recruitment process. Colleges of agriculture can create positive campus visit experiences for prospective students to increase the student population.

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